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# Sacrifice Lost and Found

— Colonial India and Postcolonial Lanka

Masakazu TANAKA

We came, we saw, we were horrified, and intervened<sup>1</sup>.

Notre société n'est pas celle du spectacle, mais de la surveillance<sup>2</sup>.

## 1. The underlying viewpoint in the colonial and the postcolonial

This article analyses how the colonial government and the post-independence state viewed and dealt with rituals involving violence that were rooted in the regional community<sup>3</sup>. I refer to these rituals as “sacrifice” for the reasons that I will give below. These rituals, of which animal sacrifice is a typical example, have almost always been negatively characterized as “savage”, “brutal”, “violent”, “unhygienic” and “superstitious”. Here I will consider the cases of hook-swinging, fire walking and animal sacrifice in South India (the Madras Presidency) as a 19th century British colony and in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) shortly after independence.

Although these rituals take different forms, in essence we can consider them all to be a kind of “sacrifice” in the sense that they share the same structure as rituals of symbolic death and regeneration. This article discusses directly how “sacrifice” in a broad sense was perceived, and indirectly how the regional communities, the common people, and the lower castes who performed the “sacrifice” were perceived. It looks at how religious experience was being transformed, and considers whether or not the view towards “sacrifice” changed during and after the colonial period.

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<sup>1</sup> Mani [1990: 35].

<sup>2</sup> Foucault [1975: 217].

<sup>3</sup> This article is closely related to the theme of Tanaka [1998].

The colonial government utilized the colony's "savage customs and culture" as the reason for their control. By stressing the colony's "primitiveness" and pointing out that theirs was a "civilizing" mission, they tried to divert the attention of the people from the economic exploitation and political oppression. In this way, the colonial occupation was transformed into an enlightenment project. "Sacrifice" was suppressed as the object of civilizing and a typical example of this was *sati* (widow burning) which was legally prohibited in 1829.

The reform and the suppression of "sacrifice" did not signify a simple dichotomous conflict between the colonial government and the people under control. This was because among the colonized people there were also those who agreed to the reforms, and hence there were complexities underlying the establishment of the reforms. There were cases where those who called for reforms under colonialism continued to be involved in the central political scene as elites after independence and be responsible for instituting similar reforms and laws in the process of development of the modern state. Here, however, I would like to stress not only the aspect of continuity in the structure of control, but also another more fundamental or structural reason for the rejection of "sacrifice".

The colonized country, which aimed to create a modern civil state after independence, was faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, it was required to adopt a system of rule appropriate for a modern state as a member of the international community, and for this it was necessary that the state ideology followed that of the Western world powers, which in those days was considered as the absolute standard. "Modernization and rationalization" based on the Western model and reforms regarding life style were undertaken in various fields. On the other hand, however, the colonized country had to reestablish its own particular culture as the symbol of the people's unity. This involved the invention of the past (history) and tradition, and the birth of national culture<sup>4</sup>. The creation of this particularity did not necessarily occur separately from the process of development of the modern state, which presupposed the existence of absolute standard. In reality, the creation of tradition was intended to be within the limits of the absolute standard, that is to say, as far as modern ethics and norms would permit. Here a standard of civilization similar to that of the colonial era was at work.

What had to be selected or rejected (or rather what were made to be selected or rejected) in order to recreate a particular culture? It can be said that this process of selection and rejection was based on similar motives to those of the colonial government, which had carried them out in the name of "reforms" and

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<sup>4</sup> See Oda [1998: 210].

“civilizing mission”. This article aims to investigate which customs became the objects of reform and what kinds of words and rhetoric were used to this end. How do the words of L. Mani that I quoted at the beginning “We came, we saw, we were horrified, and intervened” conceal the reality of the fact that “We came, we saw, we liked it, so we invaded and ruled”? This concealment continues after independence in the form of internal colonization, legitimizing domination over minority groups in the pretext of national unification. In this sense, the pursuit of the lost rituals of sacrifice is also in fact very much a postcolonial concern.

In this article, I first show that the rituals I deal with are all variants of “sacrifice” in essence and that they are ritual mechanisms of regeneration. I then examine how they were discussed and how as a result they were rejected, and consider the presuppositions behind their rejection. Finally I look at the transformation and revival of the rituals of sacrifice which were previously devalued, and point out that at a more generalized level, the rejection of sacrifice can be interpreted as a sign of conflict between modern forms of disciplinary power (Foucault) and traditional forms of power based on “death and regeneration”.

## 2. Sacrifice as a device for regeneration

Here I will examine “sacrifice” in the popular culture of the Tamil Hindus. First of all, I will discuss what kinds of interpretation were given to this type of ritual by anthropologists.

In the Tamil fishing village of Sri Lanka where I did my research, various types of violence were involved in rituals. Among these, the village people were concerned most about their performance of animal sacrifice being seen by outsiders. Although it was legally prohibited shortly before I began my research<sup>5</sup>, the village people were secretly performing the sacrifice at the Bhadra Kali festival. However, although previously several tens of goats were killed at the village festival, now it was only the village goat offered by the village representative that was sacrificed at the ritual. The goats and chickens offered by individuals were all kept alive, and later sold off in an auction. Photography of the village goat sacrifice was strictly prohibited.

Bhadra Kali is a fearful goddess that inflicts disease. However, she also protects the villagers from disease if they do not make her angry. This festival is

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<sup>5</sup> I was not able to confirm the existence of this law. See Tanaka [1997] for details of the field of research in Sri Lanka.

based on a myth that once upon a time the village was plagued with disease and the goddess appeared and saved the people. The goddess's manifestation through a medium and procession towards the village center symbolizes the outbreak of disease and also the goddess' anger. However, when the goat is finally sacrificed, the goddess transforms into a guardian deity, and at the same time the disease is wiped out. On the last day of the ten-day festival, a black goat is brought in front of the temple gate. The village representative, who is the chairman of the temple committee, pours water over the goat. The priest offers a garland to the goat and burns incense. When the goat trembles, it means that the goddess has accepted it, and the temple attendant cuts its head off with a knife. The head is placed on the ground facing the goddess and is worshipped. After this, individuals offer goats or roosters. They pour water over the animals, but do not kill them. The village goat represents the village as a whole, and the other animals represent the individual donors. They are sacrificed as substitutes of the people, and the people acquire new lives having been accepted by the goddess<sup>6</sup>.

At another festival, the festival of the Goddess Draupadi, animal sacrifice was not performed, but remnants of it could still be recognized. According to oral legend, animal sacrifice took place until the beginning of this century but it became prohibited because the priest had changed from the non-vegetarian Pandaram caste to the vegetarian Brahman caste. Here, it should be noted that this prohibition was not imposed from outside, but from the Brahmans who were members of the Tamil Hindu community. However, since they came to the village from outside at the end of 19th century, it is also possible to regard this as reform made by outsiders<sup>7</sup>.

In contrast to animal sacrifice that was legally prohibited, there is fire walking (*tīmiti*) and *kāvaṭi* (see later for explanation). Fire walking is a ritual that takes place at the climax of the festival of Goddess Draupadi and is performed by about one thousand men. It is mentioned in Sri Lankan tourist brochures, and not only the villagers but also many people from outside come to attend the festival. *Kāvaṭi* is also a very popular votive ritual and is increasingly becoming a tourist attraction.

The Goddess Draupadi festival is based on the Mahabharata, one of the two great epics of India, and its purpose is to praise the heroine Draupadi. Fire walking is performed on the final day of the eighteen-day festival. Linden wood is burned during the day where the fire walking will take place, and in the evening

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<sup>6</sup> For details, see Tanaka [1997: 99–128].

<sup>7</sup> For details, see Tanaka [1997: 157–160].

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Fig. 1. Fire Walking

fire walking is performed on the hot ashes that remain. The distance of the walk is approximately five meters. The first to walk is the medium in a state of trance (Fig. 1). He walks to the end where an image of the goddess is placed. Other devotees follow after he has finished. Some men run across the fire out of fear, but there are some who proceed with firm steps and have just as much confidence as the medium. I will omit the details of the fire walking ritual here, but it can be interpreted that the medium is a sacrificial victim offered to the goddess. The medium is like the village goat, and crosses the fire as the sacrificial victim for the village. He is followed by the devotees who come to accomplish their vows. They can be regarded as parallel to the goats and roosters that are offered after the offering of the village goat. The devotees “die” in the fire and are regenerated by the power of goddess<sup>8</sup>.

This ritual has undergone little change over two hundred years. The French

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<sup>8</sup> For details, see Tanaka [1997: 183–190].



Fig. 2. Kāvati

who traveled South India during the last half of 18th century left records regarding fire walking, *kāvati*, and hook swinging<sup>9</sup>. Prior to that is the following account of fire walking by Dubois in the mid 18th century<sup>10</sup>.

Some Votaries, again, are to be met with who make a vow to walk with bare feet on burning coals. For this purpose they kindle a large pile of wood; and when the flames are extinguished and all the wood consumed, they place the glowing embers in a space about twenty feet in length. The victim stands at one extremity with his feet in a puddle expressly prepared for the purpose, takes a spring, and runs quickly over the burning embers till he reaches another puddle on the other side.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Sonnerat [1782].

<sup>10</sup> See Hildebeitel [1991] regarding other information on fire walking.

<sup>11</sup> Dubois [1906: 598].



Fig. 3. Spiked Kāvati

*Kāvati* is a typical votive ritual in which people carry a balancing pole decorated with peacock feathers on their shoulders and worship at the temple while dancing in a state of trance (Fig. 2). *Kāvati* is based on a myth of a demon (Asura). Once upon a time, an Asura was carrying two hills on a balancing pole and was killed for provoking the anger of the god Murugan. However, by Murugan's mercy he was resurrected and came to be accepted as a faithful devotee. This ritual is accompanied by pain-inflicting actions such as inserting fine skewers into the body (Fig. 3) and piercing hooks on the shoulders<sup>12</sup>. The skewers are in the shape of the weapons carried by the god Murugan. In this way, the devotees liken themselves to the Asura and are killed by the god; and as in the myth, they are resurrected. Here also, we come across the theme of death and regeneration.

Hook-swinging (*cetiḷ*) is also a ritual highlight of the village festival, in the

<sup>12</sup> See Tanaka [1997: 93–97] for details regarding *kāvati*.



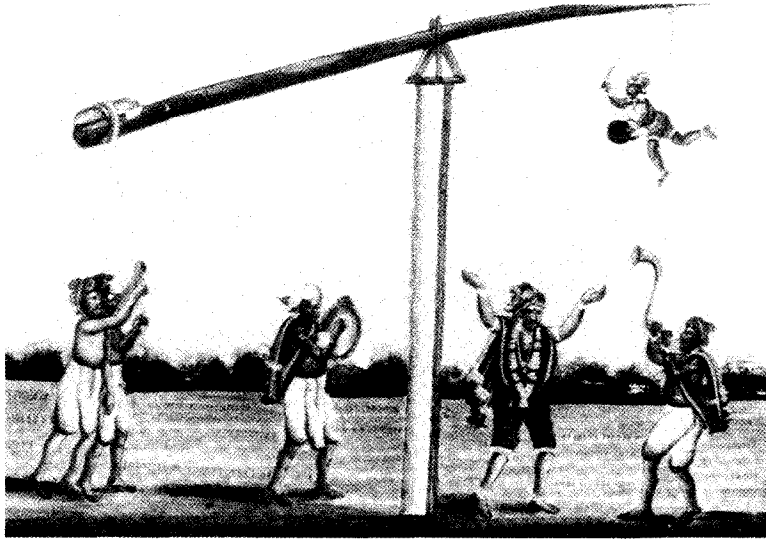


Fig. 4. Hook-swinging [Oddie 1991: 127]

same way as animal sacrifice and fire walking are<sup>13</sup>. A huge pillar is erected in front of the temple, and a long rod is fixed across it. A devotee is hooked on to one of its sides. The devotee is formally dressed and holds a sword and shield. He is suspended by hooks piercing the flesh on his back and is swung to-and-fro like a swing (Fig. 4). He throws flower petals and blesses the people standing below and sometimes sings songs. This is also a votive ritual, but sometimes a representative was selected for the village as a whole<sup>14</sup>. Sometimes, the devotee would fall and die due to the hooks not being able to support his weight, but this was considered to be a true completion of the ritual. In one region, this ritual is considered to be a reenactment of the battle between the goddess Kali and the Asura, and it is said to be based on the legend that the goddess bit the Asura's back and drank its blood after she had defeated them<sup>15</sup>. Here too we can recognize the theme of "sacrifice", as the devotees liken themselves to the Asura.

<sup>13</sup> See Oddie [1991, 1995] and Thurston [1907: 487–501] for details regarding hook-swinging. The oldest record compiled by a Westerner can be traced back to the beginning of 16th century [Oddie 1995: 4].

<sup>14</sup> The case in which the person being hung is selected from a particular caste also indicates that the ritual is collective. See Oppert [1893: 482].

<sup>15</sup> Thurston [1907: 494]. There are also myths which suggest that hook-swinging is performed in place of human sacrifice [Oddie 1995: 56].

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Many of the devotees are male but sometimes there are also female devotees. Let me refer to another account by Dubois:

At many of the temples consecrated to this cruel goddess there is a sort of gibbet erected opposite the door. At the extremity of the crosspiece, or arm, a pulley is suspended, through which a cord passes with a hook at the end. The man who has made a vow to undergo this cruel penance places himself under the gibbet, and a priest then beats the fleshy part of the back until it is quite benumbed. After that the hook is fixed into the flesh thus prepared, and in this way the unhappy wretch is raised in the air. While suspended he is careful not to show any sign of pain; indeed he continues to laugh, jest, and gesticulate like a buffoon in order to amuse the spectators, who applaud and shout with laughter. After swinging in the air for the prescribed time the victim is let down again, and, as soon as his wounds are dressed, he returns home in triumph.<sup>16</sup>

Hook-swinging can hardly be observed in India today. However, similar rituals can be seen in Sri Lanka. There is one version in which a person is hooked on a cart and taken round temples, instead of being swung on a rod and pillar fixed to the ground. Vivid images of this can be found in the ethnographic film, *God of Four Seasons* (1974).

In principle, animal sacrifice, fire walking, the *kāvati* or hook-swinging that involve inflicting self-injury, are rituals expressing gratitude. People pray to god for something and if it is granted they offer sacrifice or perform fire walking or *kāvati*. They decide what they will do when they make their prayers. The motive is the same for all these rituals, and each can be said to involve the denial of the self through symbolic death (violence), regeneration, and acceptance by god. When a victim represents the village, the village as a whole is the object of regeneration.

In animal sacrifice, although the person does not sacrifice himself, an animal is killed as the substitute and is accepted by god. It is said that the trembling of the animal before the sacrifice is a sign that god has accepted it, and it is considered to be the same as the trembling of a man who enters a state of trance. In fire walking and the *kāvati*, the performers are also expected to be in a state of trance, and in both cases a more direct form of violence towards the body can be seen. This was the reason why animal sacrifice, fire walking and hook-swinging

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<sup>16</sup> Dubois [1906: 598].

<sup>17</sup> The same form of hook-swinging also existed in India [Oppert 1893: 481].

become a source of debate in history. In the following section, I consider how these ritual performances were perceived.

### 3. Colonial India

As I mentioned in the introduction, *satī* was legally prohibited in 1829. *Satī* is often translated as widow burning, and it refers to the custom of the widow being cremated or buried alive along with the husband's corpse. The actual occurrences of *satī* were investigated under the initiative of the British and a certain section of Hindu reformists. This resulted in a prohibition law, but opposition to it was very strong<sup>18</sup>. The Sepoy Mutiny took place in 1857, and in the following year, the British government introduced a policy of non-intervention regarding Indian people's religion. Even before this, Christian churches doing missionary work in India had been insisting on non-intervention in religious festivals. Hence, it turned out that their plea was granted after the Mutiny<sup>19</sup>.

There were various rituals of sacrifice that became objects of reform, but here I will focus on hook-swinging and fire walking<sup>20</sup>. Hook-swinging had led to two deaths in 1852, so the government came to investigate it and a report dealing with hook-swinging and fire walking was compiled in 1854. Concrete measures were, however, not taken. In 1890's there was a further investigation on hook-swinging and it was prohibited in 1894 after being taken up in the Lower House of Parliament in Britain. At the beginning of the twentieth century, animals such as goats were swung on hooks instead of people<sup>21</sup>. Fire walking did not receive as much criticism, but changes did occur, such as walking over flowers instead of

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<sup>18</sup> See Mani [1987] for details.

<sup>19</sup> After the introduction of the policy of non-intervention in 1863, a new law concerning temple management was established in Madras Presidency. Whether or not the policy of non-intervention was rigorously applied in reality is, however, another issue. The policy might have had some effect in administrative terms, but in judicial terms, it led to an increase in the number of law suits concerning temples.

<sup>20</sup> Although I do not deal with them here, see Dumont [1972: 278–279] for animal sacrifice in India and Padel [1995] for human sacrifice. The matter is more complicated regarding animal sacrifice, since there was conflict between Muslims, who sacrifice cows in rituals, and Hindus, who worship the cow as being sacred. It was after independence that animal sacrifice became legally prohibited in India. Outside India, spiked *kāvati* became an object of reform in Singapore in 1930's and 1950's. According to the statement of Tamils Reform Movement, spiked *kāvati* was banned in India in early twentieth century [Nair 1972: 31].

<sup>21</sup> Oppert [1893: 477], Thurston [1907: 500], Whitehead [1921: 58–59].

flames<sup>22</sup>.

Let us see what kind of presuppositions lay in the discussions regarding hook-swinging and fire walking in the government report<sup>23</sup> issued by the colonial government in 1854. The first thing that strikes us is that the issues are considered according to dichotomies between public and private, religion and custom, religion and business, or elite and popular. The opinion of the government in this report is clear. They argue that they will not intervene in Indian people's religion, but they will reform rituals that are "cruel and horrifying". Moreover, they say that if this attempt is properly explained, they can receive support from most Indians, especially from the "wealthy intelligent class" who are not involved in hook-swinging (p. 2). Here, it can be seen that the official opinion of the government considered that hook-swinging was not a part of religion and that most Indian people did not support hook-swinging. Let us take a specific look at these points.

**[Religion or Enterprise]**

- 1 It was no religious ceremony for the Hindoo, but a spectacle disgusting to a large portion of a numerous population composed of many creeds (p. 3).
- 2 It forms no part of the religious worship of the Hindoos, and is merely the fulfilment of a vow made in time of extreme sickness (p. 17-18).
- 3 They admit that the ceremony is in no way connected with their religious faith, but they plead the usage of their ancestors for the continuation of the performance of this silly, but certainly not dangerous practice (p. 20).
- 4 It is prescribed by the religious books of the lower orders (p. 25).
- 5 This observance is not connected with the Hindoo Religion by being prescribed in any religious books (p. 23)

Here, hook-swinging and fire walking are regarded as mere unpleasant performances and not part of religion. The fact that they concerned personal vow making is also taken as a reason for them not being a part of religion. Another reason given is that they are not mentioned in sacred texts. Even if they were mentioned, the quality of that scripture was put to doubt<sup>24</sup>. If we consider the fact

<sup>22</sup> In Tamil, fire walking originally means "to walk on flowers".

<sup>23</sup> *Reports on the Swinging Festival and the Ceremony of Walking through Fire* (Madras 1854). The numbers in brackets in the following series of quotations indicate the page numbers of the *Reports*.

<sup>24</sup> A hundred years later, a custom was determined as belonging to "Great Tradition" or "Little Tradition" according to whether it was found in the scriptures. For example, see Marriot [1955].

that there was already internal criticism regarding government intervention in religion, it can be said that the question of whether or not these rituals in question were religion, performance, or business had political implication.

### **[The Elite or the Popular]**

This dichotomy manifested further as the contrast between the intelligentsia and the popular. Although there were some exceptions<sup>25</sup>, hook-swinging and fire walking were considered as customs of the unenlightened lower castes. This point is often stressed, but I want to introduce two points here.

6 This is an Annual Festival celebrated chiefly by the lower castes of Hindoos, such as the Pullars, Pullies and Pariahs, though many of the Soodrahs of all denominations will attend to witness the performance (p. 2).

7 The Bramins have no concern with them; nor have many of the most respectable Soodra castes (p. 23).

### **[Public or Private]**

The government officials and police were more concerned with where the hook-swinging took place than the execution of the ritual itself. The direct pretexts for intervention were based on questions such as whether it was performed in a public place, or somewhere near one and hence actually violating public space.

8 This festival has been stopped by the Police at various times at all the places named except Royapooram and Choolay Cosapettah, on the ground that they were a nuisance and offensive to passengers on public thoroughfares, which are common to all (p. 3).

9 Three years ago the parties at Choolay Cosapettah were called upon to desist, because it was within view of a public road, on which occasion they moved to some remote fields near Thawker's Choultry and there it would not have been disturbed (p. 3).

## **4. Post Colonial Lanka**

In Sri Lanka, after its independence in 1948, a proposal was raised regarding religious reforms of the minority Tamil Hindu society, and three points were put to question. These were legal reforms concerning temple management, the

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<sup>25</sup> For example, see Oddie [1991: 130].

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admission of untouchables into temples, and the prohibition of animal sacrifice. Here I want to deal with the third point regarding the animal sacrifice. At that time, animal sacrifice was performed in 185 temples, and every year nearly 10,000 goats were sacrificed in Jaffna alone, where the Tamil population was concentrated. The government report<sup>26</sup> published in 1951 was mostly compiled from public hearings and letters of 375 cases involving influential Tamil people and groups that were recorded from 1949 to 1950. Hence it should be pointed out that, in contrast to the *Report* in India, it is based more on the ideas of those closer to the actual people concerned.

In 1951, the report was submitted to the Parliament and a bill was presented, but it only dealt with temple management<sup>27</sup>. This was because the Tamil population was a minority in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) and the introduction of a law under the Buddhist Sinhalese government was feared to set a bad example for the future.

### [Religion, Custom or Enterprise]

The argument regarding the animal sacrifice also involved whether or not it was sanctioned by the scriptures. It was claimed in this case that the scriptures should not include the Vedas, which were the most ancient scripture and accepted animal sacrifice. Various reasons were put forward for this, as we will see below. There were some who brought up the Agama written during the middle ages, some who pointed out the changes in time, and some who argued that there was not necessarily a single interpretation of the Vedas. Moreover, it was stressed that the rituals were barbaric and were against more universal principles, such as non-violence.

1 Both the ladies were opposed to the practice of animal sacrifice. Though the practice was permitted by the Vedas in Vedic times, they could see no sanction for it in the Śaiva religion. In the form in which the practice is followed today, it is undesirable (p. 20).

2 Even if the Vedas provided for animal sacrifice, Pundit Ratnam maintained that we were not living in Vedic times. He quoted Arumuga Navalar as having said that killing of animals was permissible only by the Veddahs... for their food.

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<sup>26</sup> *Sessional Paper (V-1951), Report of the Special Committee on Temporalities, etc.* (Colombo, 1951). The numbers in brackets in the following series of quotations indicate the page numbers of this report.

<sup>27</sup> For details, see Tanaka [1993].

Questioned about the followers of Vairava and Saktha Mathams, he said that no such mathams existed in Ceylon and that they were being created by the imagination of those who wanted to perpetuate this practice for trade and personal enjoyment (p. 16).

3 While the essential doctrines of religion remain unchanged, the rituals and practices should change with time and progress (p. 22).

4 Regarding animal sacrifice, the Sabai agreed that the Agamas did not sanction this practice and that due to ignorance certain people offered animals as sacrifice just as the others who knew the Agamas made an offering of a jak fruit (p. 25).

5 On the question of animal sacrifice, the Sangam expressed themselves as opposed to the practice because it militated against the cardinal principle of their religion, namely, non-killing. They urged that this bad custom should be abolished even by legislation (p. 30).

6 Their answer was that as men alive to the social needs of the people and also the conditions of religious life in Jaffna, they were not at all happy about this artificial division between social reforms and religious practices. "Take for instance", they said, "animal sacrifice. It is a barbarous custom. It has no place in the Vedas as some say. Animal sacrifice in the form in which it is practised in Jaffna today has no religious sanction whatsoever. There are temples even now in Jaffna where Brahmins officiate at the same temples where animal sacrifice is practised. Even assuming that there is some form of sanction in the religious books, the practice is admittedly repugnant to social conscience." (p. 39)

7 There are some 20 religions in India based on the Vedas, but contradictory to each other in essential matters. This is due to the different ways in which the Vedas have been interpreted (p. 48).

The economic value of sacrifice is often stressed, too, for the price of animals killed at a festival is twice or three times as expensive as ordinary time.

8 There, the man who made the vow and received the favour from the deity after killing the goat, pays a rupee or half-a-rupee to the temple authorities, but takes away the donated goat himself, which is worth about forty or fifty rupees. This is the case of every animal or bird sacrificed. Here you will see that the said man has cheated the deity after receiving a favour (p. 32).

9 In regard to animal sacrifice, the deputation agreed that it was not a religious practice sanctioned by any religion but that it was a means of trade (p. 34).

10 It is true that the Śaiva religion forbids killing, but certain Śaivites who wish to get temporary benefits from certain deities, perform animal sacrifice, something

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like bribes to the deities. They will, no doubt, be punished for the killing by Karma (p. 47).

### **[The Elite or the Popular]**

Animal sacrifice was also considered as ritual performed by lower castes. Moreover, even though no references were made to caste, it was stressed that the performance of animal sacrifice itself was proof of ignorance and lack of education.

11 It is the depressed or lower classes who contribute largely to this practice. They put an economic value on the sacrifice (p. 62).

Opinions as regards the legal prohibition or state interference are divided. As the following opinion tells, they depend on the view of the nature of animal sacrifice.

12 We invite the State to interfere not with our religion; but we invite them to interfere with these barbaric practices and customs that masquerade as religion; and abolish them. We invite State interference to protect religion itself from the encroachment of barbarism. The primary duty of the State is to look after the spiritual needs of the people; not merely their material interests. The State would be committing a serious dereliction of its duty if it fails to intervene and abolish these evils, with all the power that it has. It is the hypocritical among us who would say, that they are for the abolition of these evils, but only that they do not want the State to interfere (p. 64).

### **5. The Perception of Sacrifice**

What similarities can be drawn from the report concerning religion (tradition) in mid-nineteenth century colonial India and that concerning animal sacrifice in Sri Lanka after independence? Firstly, they are both oriented to the scriptures. Behind this is the idea that religion is above all based on scriptures and that people's activities are organized according to them. In other words, any custom that is not found in the scriptures is not considered to be a part of religion. What, however, was the scripture for colonial India? The Vedas could be considered as having the same status as the Bible in Christianity or the Koran in Islam, but it was clear that they were very far removed from Hinduism at the time. Here we can see the prejudice held by Westerners.



In the debate concerning animal sacrifice in postcolonial Lanka, it was precisely the authority of the Vedas as scripture that was questioned. This was because animal sacrifice was accepted in the Vedas. The Śaivite scripture, the Agamas, were emphasized instead. In this way, the scriptures were indeed treated as providing standards for reference, but there was no agreement as to which scripture should be regarded as authoritative. Moreover, we can see from citation no. 4 from India that there was a tacit grading within the scriptures themselves.

The worldly and syncretic characteristics of rituals of sacrifice indirectly supported the fact that they were not mentioned in the scriptures. They were regarded as performances or opportunities to make money, and moreover the fact that non-Hindus attended the rituals was considered to be proof that they were not purely religious practices. Since popular religion is syncretic in essence, the unitary regulations of the scriptures no doubt worked to deny the very character of popular religion<sup>28</sup>.

In this way, rituals of sacrifice were not considered as part of religion, and became the object of prohibition. The reason why their prohibition did not lead to the establishment of laws and arouse further debate, as was with the case of *sati*, was because they were actually not so dangerous, and besides they were also already disappearing in parts.

Next I want to mention the debates concerning people's intentions. With the exception of animal sacrifice, whether the people at the time were performing hook-swinging and fire walking voluntarily also became a focus of debate<sup>29</sup>. If they were performing the rituals voluntarily, that in itself was taken as proof of their unenlightened nature, and this was seen to support the fact that they mainly involved low caste people with no education. Even if their status as voluntary acts were accepted, they still could not be acknowledged as part of religion as long as worldly gain was the motive behind them<sup>30</sup>. Or else, the person involved was considered to be a victim of the community or custom, or was seen to have been driven by profit<sup>31</sup>. This again strengthened the reason for the politically weak low castes to be selected. This kind of deduction was exactly the same as that which was made in the case of *sati*<sup>32</sup>.

In the case of *sati* (widow burning), the question of whether the widow's action

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<sup>28</sup> Regarding the characteristics of popular religion, see Tanaka [1997].

<sup>29</sup> For example, Brockbank [1911] mentions that the people who perform hook-swinging are made to take drugs. Dubois used the expression "victim" as I have quoted earlier in two places.

was voluntary or enforced was debated. Here, instead of the lower castes, the agency of the women, who were also seen as socially deprived, was brought to question<sup>33</sup>. If the act of *sati* were enforced, then the woman would be a victim. However, even if it were proved that she had jumped into the flames of her own accord, it would still not be clear to what extent it could be determined that it was of her own true will.

The colonial government emphasized through a series of reforms that the colony was originally uncivilized, and that colonial rule was a part of the civilizing process, and thus justified their rule. In this sense, these reforms, which appear insignificant at first sight, had immense symbolic significance for colonial rule. It was also a fact, however, that the institutions which became objects of reform involved extremely delicate problems and were either ignored or evaded unless it was absolutely necessary. The government finally took action when journalists or the mass media happened to focus on the “uncivilized” customs and blamed their persistence not on the unenlightened nature of the people but on the negligence of the government<sup>34</sup>. Here the rituals that originally contained the possibility of symbolic regeneration came to be seen as barbaric performances, and those taking part became victims instead of devotees. The people who criticized hook-swinging and fire walking, however, did not call for their abolition from the point

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<sup>30</sup> Dirks introduces the case of a hook-swinging participant who was imprisoned and analyzes the petition that was written to free him. He mentions that the person who performed hook-swinging was exempted from taking responsibility of his action because he was in a state of unconsciousness or trance. Dirks also says that the person succeeded in declaring the religious significance of hook-swinging at the same time [Dirks 1997: 198]. I would like to question this analysis since the abandonment of responsibility would probably have strengthened discriminative attitude towards the person concerned, and it cannot be assumed that trance was necessarily related to the religious characteristics of the ritual. It might even be said that a written petition could have rather enforced the impression of the non-religious nature of hook-swinging.

<sup>31</sup> Oddie gives an example of the untouchable receiving money [Oddie 1991: 127–128].

<sup>32</sup> Discourse regarding the participants as “victims” was already established in the case of women who committed *sati*, and it can be said that this was also applied to other rituals. This point is also made by Dirks [1997: 182].

<sup>33</sup> For details see Mani [1987].

<sup>34</sup> A typical example of this is probably the publication of *Mother India* [Mayo 1927] in 1927 and the series of debates that followed. In the same way, the criticisms made by the English language newspapers at the end of 19th century played an important role in the reintroduction of hook-swinging as a topic of discussion. This is pointed out by Dirks [1997] and Oddie [1995: 96].

of view of the victims. They criticized the rituals because they found in them a source of authority that differed from the modern authority on which colonial rule was based — traditional authority that legitimized the symbolic effect of violence. Just as in the debate over *sati*, the “victims” did not occupy a central place.

## 6. Further Transformation of “Sacrifice”

When ritual violence, such as that involved in hook-swinging, is exposed to the gaze of outsiders, can it only become an object of suppression or continue to exist as a tourist attraction, as in the case of fire walking? The latter case is ironic since it was originally criticized for being a mere performance. Fire walking managed to continue by ceasing to be a part of religion. This does not mean to say, however, that participants today walk on the hot ashes halfheartedly. Most of the people who performed fire walking for the first time told me that they had been terrified. Their anxiety stemmed not only from the fear of being physically burnt, but also from the fear of being abandoned by god whom they worshipped. As long as this latter kind of fear exists, fire walking will surely not become a complete tourist attraction<sup>35</sup>.

In their mission to civilize, what the colonial government attempted to do was to eliminate the display of physical infliction, the fear and pain that accompanied it, or at least to eliminate these performances from public space. Here we can see another course of the development of disciplinary power analyzed by Foucault. Foucault begins *Discipline and Punish* [*Surveiller et punir*] with his analysis of the scene of Damian’s public execution (physical punishment). A similar analysis may be done regarding religious rituals such as hook-swinging, which were oriented to symbolic death and regeneration. If so, could it not be said that in contrast to modern society, which is characterized in terms of the exercise of “bio-power” (Foucault 1976), in traditional society, there is an implementation of power to give and take life, along with the power of death and regeneration through ritual performance?

Another point I want to draw attention to here is that rituals of sacrifice that have been valued negatively are now beginning to be accepted by Western society. For example, hook-swinging has begun to spread after attracting attention due to its performance by a German American called Fakir Musafar. Musafar calls himself a “modern primitive” and attempts to reverse the value attached to the concept of “primitive”<sup>36</sup>. It can be said that Musafar employs bodily mutilations

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<sup>35</sup> Regarding fire walking as a tourist attraction, see Brown [1984] for the case in Fiji.

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such as hook-swinging as a means of resistance in order to break away from the body that is normalized through discipline. It is a challenge towards the power of normalization and a kind of testimony of being outside disciplinary power. Fire walking is spreading as a part of the New Age movement, which advocates a return of the traditions of aborigines and the East<sup>37</sup>. Here also we can say that rituals of sacrifice are attracting attention as a means of resistance against modern society. It can be said that the “mechanism of regeneration” is becoming recognized as a means of leading to a sphere outside modern forms of power<sup>38</sup>.

Finally, I would like to mention that these applications of rituals of sacrifice are not necessarily contemporary phenomena or the result of globalization. Colonial experience is surely not to be analyzed from a one-way gaze. In this article I dealt with the viewpoints of the government and reformers due to limitation in the availability of relevant materials. But, it might have been the case that there were already people like Musafar at that time. Surely there were some colonizers at the periphery of the gaze of Orientalism, whose desires were aroused by fear or attraction towards the alien culture. The discovery of such people would introduce a new dimension to the accounts of colonial experience. It is also necessary to include in our discussion the aspects of fear, desire, and belief of the Hindus who pierce themselves with iron hooks. By doing so, we may begin to overcome the static dichotomous analytical framework, such as the West versus the non-West, control versus resistance, or the elite versus the popular. This article is an attempt to move towards turning our attention to the micro bodily level of colonial and postcolonial experiences, which have hitherto been considered in terms of their macro “world historical” aspects.

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<sup>36</sup> See a volume of *Body and Society* (vol. 5 no. 2–3, 1999) featuring Modern Primitives.

<sup>37</sup> See Danford [1989: 214–288] for details.

<sup>38</sup> Of course, it can be said that performance had a function of strengthening the dominant ideology in traditional society. For the significance of performance as critique of contemporary society, see Butler’s works [Butler 1990, 1993].

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